the house of poetry is a hotel

notes and quotes on poetry

Tom Corrado

I do this I do that. - Frank O'Hara

Roadmap

Poem
Language
Facing the blank page
The mystique of the masterpiece
Voice
thoughts > ideas > words > images > poem
Nothing is irrelevant
Transcribers Translators Transformers
Accessibility
Making sense
Aural sex
Got MICS?
Very new poetry
The reader as writer
The house of poetry is a hotel

A poem is words
Every word weighs

A poem does not have to rhyme
It does not have to mean
It does not have to make sense
It does not have to tell a story
It does not have to be linear

A poem is a snapshot
It is intense
It is concise
It is lean
It is musical
It can jump right in
It can begin anywhere
It can go anywhere
It can include anything

1. Two poets talking . . .

P1: Why do you write poetry?
P2: Huh?
P1: You write poetry. So I'm asking why you write poetry.
P2: Hmm . . .
P1: I mean do you write poetry to tell a story, to entertain, to confess, to inform, to convince, to slam?
P2: Uh . . .
P1: Do you write it to impress, to confront, to console, to share, to clarify, to mystify, to evoke, to provoke, to understand, to free, to rap, to vent, to . . . ?
P2: I guess I write poetry because I cannot not write poetry!
P1: You write poetry because you have to?
P2: Yup!

2. I use the metaphor of a hotel to show that the house of poetry is huge, with rooms for all types of poets and all flavors of poems.

3. The poetry hotel was opened in the 1800s by Walt (Whitman) and Emily (Dickinson).

4. Here's Walt:

A lonely 36-year-old closeted homosexual from a family of misfits, a printer, an editor, a sometimes teacher who hates teaching, loves opera, oratory, the streets, the rivers, bohemianism, reads widely but indiscriminately, an inveterate scribbler, note-taker, self-promoter, huge ego, reinvents himself in a poem, becomes the poem, concussively confident, gutsy, enthusiastically high on life, a Kosmos, embracing everyone and everything, celebrating everyone and everything, inventing a distinctly new art showcasing a presumptive "I" and an assumptive "you," unshackling the line, the rhyme, the rhythm; its utter wildness changing the course of world literature; embodying the ideals, attributes, subjects, and speech of his native land, America; foreshadowing Allen Ginsberg's century-later pronouncement of spontaneous and fearless first thought best thought: his 1855 first edition of Leaves of Grass is far and away the best of all nine; how he did what he did as mysterious as how Shakespeare did what he did; Leaves flips poetry on its head, turns it upside-down, becomes the Holy Grail before which other poets prostrate themselves.

5. There's just so much to Whitman - and most of it is wonderful! His bold, perennially new American voice, his equally radical claims about body and soul and what it means to be a self. Here's a sample of one of my Whitman favorites: The *Sun-Down Poem* better known as *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,* which is regarded by many as one the greatest poems ever written in English. Among other things, it speaks to our shared humanity:

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd. . . .

6. And here's Emily:

A strong-willed, precocious, introspective middle child of a wealthy New England family gets a solid early education, refuses to submit to the mores of her family, her community, her era, grows into an active, gender-challenging, audacious presence, is seduced by words, becomes immersed in them, gets high on them, takes to writing with a furious intensity, crafting an

explosive, intimidatingly new type of verse, almost singlehandedly revolutionizing poetry and the language of poetry from her white-curtained, high-ceilinged second-floor bedroom, writing poems and letters at night at a child's school desk, sewing the poems into packets, locking the packets away for discovery after she'd passed, redefining the landscape of poetry, repopulating it with her own capitalization, punctuation, and meter; throwing off the shackles of convention, crafting a new persona for the first person as a keen, sharp-sighted, ironic observer who confronted head-on society's constraints and limitations and replaced them with imagined and imaginable alternatives; sharing little, publishing little, retreating into herself for the sake of her revolutionary art, leaving a legacy of almost 1,800 idiosyncratic, enigmatic poems and 10,000 letters that spellbind us still.

7. Here's one of my favorite Dickinson poems:

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It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness -
I'm so accustomed to my Fate -
Perhaps the Other - Peace -

Would interrupt the Dark -
And crowd the little Room -
Too scant - by Cubits - to contain
The Sacrament - of Him –

I am not used to Hope -
It might intrude upon -
Its sweet parade - blaspheme the place -
Ordained to Suffering -

It might be easier
To fail - with Land in Sight -
Than gain - My Blue Peninsula -
To perish - of Delight -

8. Say what? . . . LANGUAGE . . .

is a tool, an organic, untrustworthy, limited system of symbols for communicating ideas.

9. *The question is,* said Alice, *whether you can make words mean so many different things.* - Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass,* 1871

10. *It is impossible to speak in such a way that you cannot be misunderstood.* - Karl Popper

11. *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.* - Ludwig Wittgenstein

12. *Writers, like all of us, carry around a lot of quirky, trivial, nostalgic, random, or otherwise hard-to-classify stuff in their heads, and who*

are we as readers to deny them this reserve fund, even if we can ever only partially share their frames of reference? - James Gibbons, reviewing John Ashbery's *Breezeway*, hyperallergic.com, July 12, 2015

13. *Most poets, I think, are drawn to the unknown, and writing, for them, is a way of making the unknown visible.* - Mark Strand

14. Most people are uncomfortable with ambiguity.

15. The more ambiguous the poem, the less accessible the poem.

16. It's tough to read something without trying to make sense of it. Without trying to understand it. Without trying to figure out what it means. I guess we're wired for that. Aren't we "here" to make sense of the world?

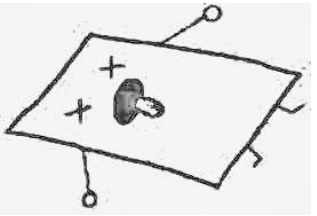
17. Making SENSE . . .

or trying to understand something involves interpretation. To interpret text, a reader grabs whatever contextual cues are available, and uses them to engage closure. Tweaking textual symbols impacts interpretation,

interpretation impacts understanding, understanding impacts closure, closure impacts takeaway or the meaning one ascribes to a text.

18. *The degree to which a poem is explained or paraphrased is precisely the degree to which it ceases being a poem. If nothing is left of the poem, it has become a paraphrase of itself, and readers will experience the paraphrase in place of the poem. It is for this reason that poems must exist not only in language but beyond it. . . Perhaps the poem is ultimately a metaphor for something unknown, its working-out a means of recovery.* - Mark Strand

19. THE READER AS WRITER?



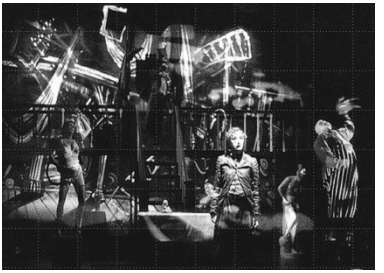
Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* (1967) was an attack on traditional literary criticism and its focus on trying to figure out the author's intentions and uncover the original meaning of a text. For Barthes, the author is merely a scriptor whose purpose is to produce but not to explain text. Meaning is not something retrieved or discovered but rather spontaneously generated in the act of reading; it lies in language itself and its impressions on the reader.

BUT WHAT IS POETRY?

20. Poetry is words. Every word weighs.

21. *Each word, being equally important, exists in absolute focus, having a weight it rarely achieves in fiction.* - Mark Strand

22. Words trigger images . . .



23. *A poem is a place where conscious and unconscious thought, reality and dream, fact and symbol all jostle for attention on the same busy stage.* - Dan Chiasson, reviewing Robyn Schiff's, A Woman of Property, *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2016

24. *I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. And so his mind repeats that action and*

travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you're different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference. - Anne Carson

25. POEMS ARE . . .

snapshots. They are intense. They are concise. They are lean. They can jump right in. They can begin anywhere. They can go anywhere. They can include anything.

26. POEMS DO NOT . . .

have to rhyme. They do not have to mean. They do not have to make sense. They do not have to tell a story. They do not have to be linear.

27. AURAL SEX?

Suppose I were to begin by saying that poetry is aural sex. That poetry is my erotic other. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession. That it began slowly. As a curiosity. An appreciation. Then, one day, it became more. A captivation. A seduction. That I had been seduced by the sound of words; by the sounds words make when they engage.

28. DOES YOUR POEM . . .

- use words sparingly and precisely
- provide a fresh look at something
- have good sound, rhythm, & tempo

- include engaging images
- present interesting juxtapositions?

29. Poetry's containers . . .

Dramatic (uses monologues or dialogues)
Lyric (expresses personal thoughts and emotions)
Narrative (tells a story)

30. What was I looking for?

I wasn't always sure. What I found myself responding to, what continued to compel me, was precision and surprise. Memorable lines, craft deployed. Poems I could not shake, texts that arrested me. Poems that demonstrated a certain kind of thinking, imagistic or metaphorical thinking, poetic inquiry. Literary investigations, obsessions, intelligence. Emotional accuracy. Poems written under pressure, poems in which something dramatic is at stake, at risk, for the speaker, who would not be deterred. A kind of ruthless authenticity. Poems that take themselves to task. Poems in which something spooky or unsuspected happens in language, poems that stood up to rereading, experiences I could not forget, the happiness

and suffering of others. I found many poems of grief and lamentation, but also erotic poems of celebration, comic poems of wild hilarity, joy. - Edward Hirsch, What Is the Task? *American Poetry Review,* September/October 2016

31. No shortage of definitions . . .

Kim Addonizio: Words that wake you up to your own life.
John Ashbery: A recording of my thought processes, the experience of experience.
W. H. Auden: Memorable speech.
Robert Bly: A dream that you are willing to share with the community.
Charles Bukowski: Words that keep me from total madness.
Anne Carson: An action of a mind captured on a page.
Leonard Cohen: The evidence of life.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The best words in the best order.
T. S. Eliot: Poetry is punctuation, an escape from emotion and personality.
Lawrence Ferlinghetti: The shortest distance between two humans.
Robert Frost: An emotion that has found its thought and the thought has found words.
Jack Gilbert: The fearless exploration of the adult heart, brutally honest portrayals of love, loss, joy, sorrow, longing, loneliness, aging, grief, and betrayal.
Nikki Giovanni: A way of capturing a moment.
Louise Gluck: Autobiography, but divested of the trappings of chronology and comment, the metronomic alternation of anecdote and

response.
Natalie Goldberg: A small memento of enlightenment.
Jorie Graham: Begins out of nowhere. Moves irrationally. Goes to the heart of the matter.
Seamus Heaney: Language in orbit.
Lyn Hejinian: A way of thinking.
Mary Karr: Instantaneous connections.
Czeslaw Milosz: The passionate pursuit of the real.
Issac Newton: Ingenious nonsense.
Frank O'Hara: I do this I do that.
Don Paterson: The science of nuance in language.
Charles Simic: Other people's snapshots in which we recognize ourselves.
Mark Strand: A way of feeling deeply without being threatened.
Mark Van Doren: The shortest distance between you and the subject.
Robert Penn Warren: A light by which we see life.
Walt Whitman: *I celebrate myself.*
William Carlos Williams: Poetry is language charged with emotion . . . words, rhythmically organized . . . a complete little universe.
Matthew Zapruder: A constructed conversation on the frontier of dreaming.

ARS POETICA . . .

32. *If people hate poetry, it's the pretense that it matters. . . . I think the poet must pretend to be a regular person. . . . My writing is a way that I process being in the world. . . . The opportunity to have a thought that creates a poem just makes me feel alive. It makes me feel connected*

to the world. It makes me feel like I have a purpose. - Eileen Myles

33. *My poems are about the experience of experience.* - John Ashbery

34. *You write what you want to write in the way that it has to be.* - Anne Carson

35. *The way I write, since I do leave out most of the connections, and very little is pinned down, I feel that I am doing a minimum of damage to other possibilities that might arise in a reader's mind.* - Edward Gorey

36. *Some poems are not about the about.* - Ilya Kaminsky

37. *My poems are about how nothing is about, they're not about about.* - Heather McHugh

38. *Discussions of craft are at best precarious. We know only afterwards what it is we have done.* - Mark Strand

VERY NEW POETRY?

39. In her essay, *How to Read, and Perhaps Enjoy,*

Very New Poetry, (The Believer, 2004), Harvard Professor Stephanie Burt tells us that Very New Poetry:

- does not tell a story
- is hard or impossible to paraphrase
- teases, demands, frustrates
- incorporates data from a range of realms
- weds subjective (internal) and objective (external) realities
- tries to capture the random, irregular nature of experience
- mixes tragedy, whimsy, indifference, cheerfulness
- appears simultaneously attached and detached
- brings together diverse voices and sources
- consists of free-floating, discrete, seemingly unrelated lines with few transitionals
- uses sincere, non-ironic straight talk or everyday language
- is indeterminate and open-ended
- presents nonlinear declarations
- has a fragmented, interrupted, choppy rhythm
- moves away from the literal
- focuses on artifice (and personality) at the expense of sincere or natural speech
- leaps - as a person's thoughts do - from topic to topic
- mixes the real and the surreal

Further, Burt suggests that when reading Very New Poetry:

- don't look for a story
- don't get hung up on trying to figure out what the poem means or what the poet is trying to say

- don't fight the poem, let your imagination interact and collaborate with it
- accept irrationality
- look for a persona and a world
- enjoy the words, the wordplay, the double meanings, the images, the sounds
- look for self-descriptive or for frame-breaking moments, when the poem stops to tell you what it describes
- let the poem wash over you.

40. In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990,* Jorie Graham reminds us that Very New Poems:

. . . do not let us become comfortable with plot, point of view, setting; eventually force us to read in a different way; force us to let music take the place of narrative flow; force us to let our senses do some of the work we would "normally" be letting our conscious minds do. We discover, in the process, that we can trust a deeper current of our sensibility, something other than the lust-for-forwardness, with all its attendant desires for closure, shapeliness, and the sense that we are headed somewhere and that we are in the hands of something. We are forced to suspend these desires, to let the longing stay alive unsatisfied; forced to accord power to a portion of ourselves and a portion of the world we normally deem powerless or feminine or 'merely' intuitive.

41. Interviewed in the May/June 2023 American Poetry Review, poet Bianca Stone said *I think poetry is an effective outlet for the natural*

movement of the mind, with its ambiguity and non sequitur way of assembling thought. . . . Poetry is not a craft of rhyme or cleverness of form. It is not an outlet for emotion. Rather it is a delicate yet messy orchestration of human thought as it is linked to the ineffable mystery of consciousness. . . . We need the written texts that confuse people's idea of "meaning," to challenge what they think meaning is.

42. TO MAKE A POEM . . . YOUR THOUGHTS? . . .

thoughts > ideas > words > images > poem

Got MICS, i.e., metaphor imagery concision sound?

43. Talk to yourself or to an imaginary someone about something . . . an event, an experience, an observation, a feeling. Jot it down as you go along.

44. Dispel the mystique of the masterpiece . . .

Keep it simple. Go easy on big words, adjectives, the definite article. Don't worry about making sense, making a point, unearthing a truth, resolving an issue, solving a problem. Don't

sweat grammar or spelling. Jot down your thoughts, your whatever. Thinking, like life, is messy; it's not a neat package. Don't be intimidated. Have fun!

45. *Inspiration is for amateurs, the rest of us just show up and get to work.* - Chuck Close

46. Channel Frank – *I do this I do that* - O'Hara:

He was always running lines - at work, on his walks through the city, at parties, lectures, readings - capturing, documenting, memorializing his experiences, in the moment, the lines waiting to be realized through pencil, pen, or typewriter. Everything he wrote about either happened to him or he felt it happened to him. He loved to write poetry, and did so daily, stuffing books, envelopes, drawers, shopping bags, and letters to friends with his output, often giving away only copies. He rarely submitted a poem for publication.

He was smart. Funny. Passionate. Seductive. Irreverent. And fun. He knew tons about tons but didn't lord it over you. He made you feel welcome. He made you feel important. He made you feel as if the poem had been written just for you. He wrote about what he saw but what he saw was not what you or I would see. Kind of like what Van Gogh saw when he looked at sunflowers. And he wrote all the time. In the moment. About all kinds of things. He didn't sweat the small stuff, or, for that matter, the not-so-small stuff. For him, everything was fair game. Everything was subject matter. For him,

Life was good! And he wanted everyone to feel that way. Like Miles Davis, he was way cool, he went on his nerve, he did not fret mistakes. For him, like Miles, there were no mistakes. His exuberance was contagious! His poems? Odes to joy! Reading them, I feel good.

47. Longhand or computer or both? Your call. The computer makes composing and editing a snap.

48. *You can put anything in a poem. Nothing is irrelevant.* - Eileen Myles

49. Poets, unlike other writers, are faced with a blank page whenever they begin a new poem.

50. *Pretty soon, you have a few words, and tomorrow comes, and by the end of the week, you have a few lines. The process of writing is discovering what you want to say and being sure you're saying it in the best possible way you can. . . . Ideally, it would be best to just write, to suppress the critical side of my nature and indulge the expressive. Perhaps. But I tend to think of the expressive part of me as rather tedious - never curious or responsive, but blind and self-serving. And because it has no power, let alone appetite, for self-scrutiny, it fits the reductive, dominating needs of the critical side of me. The more I think about this, the more I think that not writing is the best way to write.* - Mark Strand

51. trans - cribers/lators/formers . . .

Lately I've been playing around with the idea

of how poets make poems. How some, that I'll call transcribers, try to take a snapshot of the moment. How others - translators - try to extrapolate the essence of the moment. And how still others - transformers - try to springboard beyond the moment. These three elements - transcription, translation, transformation - are present in different degrees when poets make poems.

52. *While there is nothing automatic about the poem, nevertheless it has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though before I knew it was written what I wanted to do.* - Wallace Stevens

A mini-mani-festo of MY POETRY . . .

No, no, said Alice, *it's stream of unconsciousness!*

53. We blunder along. Trying to make sense of it all. Trying to connect the dots. Imposing meaning on the endless parade of impressions, the constant flow of images. Thinking and discovering and remembering and forgetting.

Using our limited tools to convey our thoughts, to spin our yarns. I'm trying to portray this - the experience of experience - in my poetry, filling my poems with haphazard memories, scraps of conversation, the inner mumbo-jumbo of the mind, life's buzzing distractions. I'm interested in the limits of language, in teasing the edges of functionality. I'm not interested in linearity, in telling a story, in dispensing bromides, in picture-perfect representation.

54. That's why I like Ashbery so much! He dips into his "stream of continuously flowing poetic stuff," and pulls something out. In many ways, this is a lot easier than using one's experiences as a basis for a poem.

55. So, I can start my poetry engine with nothing more than a phrase, an expression, whatever. If I'm really blocked, I'll pull out Ashbery or Carson or Hejinian or Nelson or any piece of writing for that matter and read something to prime my pump. I don't have to search through my experiential suitcase to find something to write about - my first grade teacher, the death of my cat, whatever - although I have done that. I don't feel I have to tell a story - though a few fellow poets insist that my poems - however surreal sometimes - are stories.

56. I write to a hazy muse, prompted by words I read or hear.

57. I don't know what I'm doing or how I do what I do, but I know that I feel compelled to do it and to keep doing it. I have fun doing it, and I

keep doing it until I reach that point with a poem where I either say "uncle" or "yes, this is kinda good! I like it!"

58. I continue to pump out poems despite having days when I feel it's all worthless crap, stringing words together with the pompous notion that they're akin to a piece of classical music. Just let the words, the sounds, the images wash over you, pass through you, kind of like meditation - in and out.

59. All my "art" - poems, paintings, sculptures, musical improvisations - is an attempt to engage ambiguity. Not necessarily to make sense of it, or to try to extract meaning from it, but simply to embrace it. To massage it. To have fun with it. To play with it. To "create" something from it.

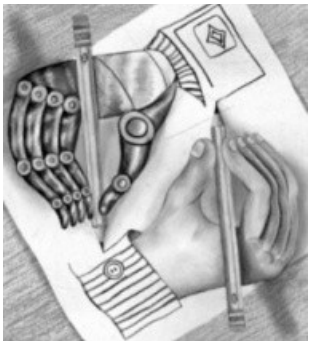
60. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert, Emily Dickinson wrote *subjects hinder talk.* I like that. I'd rather not pick a subject. I'd rather play with indeterminacy, thereby better inviting the collaboration of the reader or listener into the experience of a poem.

61. I like to think that art should stand on its own, but I can't help but look behind the curtain for information about the artist, how they lived, how they did their thing, how they weathered life's ups and downs.

62. Most of my stuff is not autobiographical, though there are those who would argue that anything anyone writes is autobiographical since the writer in writing is putting his or her

unique spin on something. Indeed, the writer has to have had some perception of something - real or imagined - before he or she can transform it or transcribe it into written form. The writer is a filter.

63. A RECORD OF MY THINKING . . .



A poem for me is a chunk of text composed of discrete, non-linear lines portraying the natural movement of the mind, the activity of thinking.

64. IT HAD TO BE YOU! . . . Shadowing Ashbery!

I decided to mimic John Ashbery's use of the second person pronoun. *You is uniquely critical because it offers the reader the feeling of being addressed or accompanied even in the most forbidding terrain. The reader may finish a poem with no purchase on meanings or patterns but with a feeling of connection to it and the poet - you serving as a tether holding the reader.* - John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You,* University of Georgia Press, 2007.

65. In 2013, I appropriated the IT term, *Screen Dump,* to describe the process of dumping my thoughts onto the screen in an attempt to transcribe my thinking.

66. Here's an example . . .

Screen Dump 712

But there was more to it than the translation
skirting the main event
while asking the resident Sphinx
the passcode to some inner chamber
where alternatives are kept on ice
with Facebookers posting the past
despite the plethora of contemporary
adaptations of your take on *Beowulf* . . .
those damaged destined to repeat their
obsessions tumbling head over heels
into roundabouts . . .
A treatise on the importance
of getting your house in order
targets hoarders making the mess messier . . .
This longing for one last shot
at immortality . . .
a day in the life of a day in the life . . .
everything volumizing a high wire act
with no less than how to get through the day . . .
The vigilance you signed up for, yes? . . .
Can you imagine this ancient hatch? . . .
This escapade of hopscotch
fueling the voices in the air
that today argue happenstance . . . the lone and
level sands stretching to a wooden-legged
captain awaiting a white whale? . . .

67. I found that the non-linear chunks could be chunked. I call these chunked chunks, *particulars,* lifting the term from Shakespeare's Henry IV: *Do thou stand for my father, and examine me on the particulars of my life.*

68. From Particulars 2:

You're taking notes on the straight and narrow
as the detritus of a life
crashes the weight of a wake . . .
Act One Scene One:
You search for younger days:
riding a balloon-tire bicycle through the
streets
and into fields of dreams
appropriating clichés with reckless abandon . . .

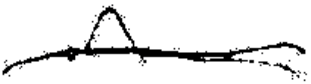
69. This led me to what I call Modular Poetry. A modular poem is made up of discrete lines that can be remixed, rearranged, chunked into different combinations . . . read in any order . . . up, down, in, out, forward, backward, beginning anywhere, ending anywhere, sequentially, non-sequentially, individually or as one continuous text . . .

70. WALKING A GREASED TIGHTROPE!

Shouldn't poetry take risks? Shouldn't it "make it new?" Shouldn't it expose our vulnerabilities? Our secrets? Our innermost thoughts? Shouldn't it do more than feed the status quo? More than entertain? Inform? Clarify? I say yes! I say poets should walk a greased tightrope. They should take chances, push the envelope. I like poets who prestidigitate words; who massage them; who work them in new, different, sometimes odd, uncomfortable ways. I like poets who are non-sequiturists; who play with words, pull them out of a hat, push them around, mix them into unconventional, but tasty, stews. I admire poets who are unafraid to move beyond the literal; who toggle between the real and the surreal; who try to mimic the process of thinking; who attempt to portray the experience of experience. In other words, I'm fascinated not so much by what poets say but how they say it. I like to think that open-ended poems or fragmented poems or just plain weird poems better invite the collaboration and participation of the reader's or listener's imagination into the experience of the poem. . . .

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine!

- Frank O'Hara



swimming in happenstance press

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2023